A Radical Among Us: An Interview with Marjorie Schwarzer

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The second edition of Marjorie Schwarzer’s award-winning book *Riches, Rivals & Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* was published this year by the American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums) and includes an author’s Afterword focused on the rapidly expanding use of digital technology and social media by museums. Schwarzer argues that the digital world “can provide a path toward new assemblages of knowledge, a means for helping museums understand and redefine themselves, so that society may do the same.” Implicit in this sentence is the need for museums to better reflect society, but more importantly it is a commentary that as a society we have a continual obligation to reflect and evolve, ever striving for a better world.

For those of us lucky enough to know Marjorie, we know how deeply and radically she embraces this obligation to better our museum field and our society. This summer I sat down with Marjorie, at a café in Oakland to talk about museums, clear thinking, and the future.

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AM: What has been the response to *Riches, Rivals & Radicals* (RRR) from our museum field colleagues and the general public?

MS: In the museum field, I discovered that most professionals did not know about the history of their own organizations and even the field itself. This made the research difficult because most museums keep poor institutional archives for themselves and sometimes departments within the same institution differ about their history.

Another trend I noticed was that museum professionals tend to think that they thought of a new idea first. Yet history is incremental and in the arc of history, there is no such thing as a new idea – ideas are built on each other and other traditions. For example, while we think that interactive exhibits were first developed in 1960s science centers, actually they have been around since early 1900s as “touchable exhibits.”

I have heard from non-museum people who read and reviewed the book that they were kind of surprised to learn that museums always strived to be educational and were not just stuffy places. They didn’t know that museums were founded to be beacons of civilization and modern thought. And in that we see that museums have always had to justify their existence; this is not a modern phenomenon.

AM: You did a tremendous amount of research for RRR with almost 25 pages of notes to prove it. From all of this, what topics piqued your interest for deeper exploration?
MS: Since the first edition came out in 2006, I have done more research and writing on the tremendous contributions made by women museum professionals, the impacts of technology on museums and audiences, and how museums have responded to economic booms and busts, like the great depression. And now, I am researching alternative financial models, and of all things, seating in museums! This is both a design issue and relates to accessibility.

AM: RRR ended with Hurricane Katrina; why did you select that event?

MS: This tragedy demonstrated the resiliency of museum staff, their pluckiness, that they don’t give up. The response to what happened showed the powerful relationships between museums and their communities. Museum professionals will always go to immense lengths to benefit the museum and the public.

AM: Why the new edition? What did you feel you had to say?

MS: When RRR was written in 2005 it was still too early to talk about digital technology, the full potential of the Internet. After all, social media and smart phones barely existed. And yet, today museums still haven’t really even begun to tap into the power of all this. The Internet changes our way of relating to time, place, images, and the taking in of knowledge. The question now is how will museums respond?

AM: If you wrote RRR in another 100 years, what would it contain?

MS: If we are still here? Think about the human race: how short our time has been on the planet and what we are doing to the planet, what a crazy species we are. I hope someone will have the opportunity write that book. That is what museums can strive for – to perpetuate thoughtfulness and stewardship of our planet and each other. Museums need to create places where people can slow down, feel, and think critically in new ways. We have a lot of work to do.

AM: What is your favorite museum showcased object?

MS: The Alba Madonna oil painting by the great Renaissance artist Rafael! I have visited this luscious painting in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC since I was 7 years old. I always go back to it. But it wasn’t until researching RRR that I learned what a controversial painting this was. In the midst of US economic collapse in the early 1930s, Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon purchased the painting from the Soviets who were selling paintings to finance the Russian Revolution. While so many Americans stood in bread lines, Mellon indulged in art, paying the highest price ever for a single painting. Later, after enduring a humiliating trial where he was accused of tax evasion, he bequeathed it to the American public. The provenance of this painting was so jarring to me because this beautiful composition had made such an impact on my life and career and then to find this out. I have had to ask myself if the ends justified the means? Wouldn’t the money have been better spent feeding hungry people? This makes you think about your own personal relationships to objects. It gives insights about how we can get so personally attached to a thing without knowing its history.

AM: If you could materialize a new museum, what would it be?

MS: A funny museum! The whole time you were there, you would be laughing. You would be laughing at the way the stories are presented and objects are juxtaposed. You’d be laughing so hard you would be gasping for air. Laughter is a great thing for humanity. It would be funny for everyone and not at the expense of any one. A museum of humor!
On a more serious note, I’d like a museum of clear thinking. A place to present problems and issues and allow people to experience them in the present tense, to get clarity on where they stand in order to act responsibly and thoughtfully in the future.

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I would be the first person in line for Marjorie’s Museum of Clear Thinking! AM

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